

What is JuJu?

There are many forms of West African spiritual beliefs or religions. Juju is the term given to the religion of the people of Yoruba.

If you were to look at the makeup of the world's religions in percentage terms you would see that Christianity makes up the greater number with a total of 33% followed by Islam at 21%.

6% of the world's population practice or believe in traditional African faiths. This is equal to the numbers who practice Buddhism and Chinese traditional religions. It is greater than those who practice Judaism that only stands at 0.22% or Sikhism (0.36%).



Joujou is the French word for toy or a small object and this term was adopted when Europeans arrived in West Africa in the fifteenth century they noticed that people wore small pouches containing various items such as powders, plant matter and animal bone on or around their body. It became a mistaken belief by the early Europeans that the actual pouches or the small toy like items were the items of worship themselves; in fact they were, as in many religions, merely symbolic of greater Gods and powers.

The predominate area where Juju is practiced is in the southwest of the country in Edo state and the River Niger Delta region.

Juju is the traditional belief in the spirit world and how the gods affect the activities of everyday life.

It is the belief of many Nigerian's that whatever happens to you in life is pre-written. The gods have mapped out your life. Nothing happens by chance, it is foretold. If you lead a good life, good things will happen to you. The spirits are the messengers of the gods and they aid communication between the gods high above and 'Man' on the surface of the earth. In comparison to Christianity, the spirits could be seen as angels.

There are two types of spirits; the 'living-dead' and the 'dead-dead'

The living-dead spirits

These are the spirits of those human beings who once lived and have died in recent times. Such that there are people living today who can remember those individuals when they walked the earth as human beings, before they died. For example a relative, an aunt, a grandparent, a parent or sibling. These are seen as good spirits who, it is believed, may become your guardian spirit or angel. In order to keep the spirits on your side you may have to offer the gifts. If you look after the spirits, they will look after you.

The dead-dead spirits

These are the spirits of the deceased where not one person living today can remember that person when they were alive.

This makes these spirits dangerous. They are the ones who will carry out bad acts and cause bad luck. These are the spirits that will punish breaches of any contract or oath that has been made or sworn to a god.

These spirits are traditionally known to move and make contact with humans during the hours of darkness. They come during the night while all are sleeping leave a person defenceless entering the body they take control of your head and perhaps your soul.

The person knows they are there for they appear in dreams. If a person has upset the Gods or the spirits, they will visit in sleep and met our punishment. The fear is they bring nightmares that can bring madness or death.

So if a person were to die in the night as they slept, it is seen as a sure sign that the spirits played a part in that death.

Abuse of the religion

The human traffickers of Edo and Delta States of Nigeria have hijacked the cultural beliefs in Juju to blackmail their victims. To satisfy the greed for money for those involved including traditional priests paid to carry out the ceremonies the strong belief in the spirits that makes this a powerful weapon for modern day slave traders.



Once a potential victim has been put through and sworn an oath of obedience they are captured, snarled in the trap without the need for physical restraints. The bondage is in the beliefs, there is no requirement to lock up victims and have them watched. You have the spirits to do that for you.

Using the ever-binding power of the Juju, instructions can be given to individuals to complete acts or instructions. In the case of human trafficking although the controller will be many miles away the belief by the victim that she is being watched is so powerful she will feel compelled to comply with instructions, to do otherwise would risk death.

This control has been demonstrated on many occasions within the United Kingdom. Victims arrive in the UK often they present themselves to the border agencies. Often due to their young age are placed into the care of the local authorities only to abscond a week later and to reunite with the next operator of the trafficking organization to be exploited either here or exported to work the street of southern Europe.

The use of these spiritual beliefs is so strong that it is a powerful obstruction to the law-enforcement agencies across Europe. It has become a challenging task to gain evidence from the trafficked victims. Stopping them from speaking out and identifying themselves as victims and reporting their exploitation and offering names of their 'handlers'.

This explains the very small number of convictions of Nigerian human traffickers in Europe, but now expertise and determination to fight this cruelty is growing and those with inside and expert knowledge are able to help to increase more positive outcomes in these cases.

ATC is such an organisation working to increase awareness of understanding and techniques to secure prosecutions and greater safety for victims.